

Vår Historia

SMOKY VALLEY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

From Latvia to Lindsborg



Astrid Neilson Press Photo c1955

**PUBLISHED
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Astrida Neilson-Berrios experienced more adventure in her first thirteen years than most do in a lifetime, but what that did was shape her for the rest of her life.

Astrida was born August 6th, 1934 in Riga, Latvia as Astrida Zalitis to Karlis and Elvira Zalitis. Her family's last name would change upon coming to America, but not all would make it. Astrida's father, Karlis, was killed shortly after being drafted in the Latvian Army during WWII. Just as we say USA is "just across the pond" from England, Riga is "just across the pond" from Stockholm Sweden, "pond" being Baltic Sea in this case.

As Russian troops neared the city of Riga in 1941, many civilians fled in fear of their life. Elvira, seven year-old Astrida, and three other family members were among those. Many women and children fled on foot or horseback, marching with three to four thousand Latvian soldiers to a prison camp under the command of American soldiers, but soon transferring to British control. This took several days, and they slept on the ground and ate what little food they had plus weeds from the fields along the way.

Several years later, Astrida shared her memory of the first American soldier that showed compassion to her and family at the prison camp,

by occasionally throwing tins of food to them. She carried a military issue can opener for years in her purse as a reminder.

From the prison camp, Elvira and young Astrida purchased passage on a ship to Germany, but Elvira got a bad feeling about the ship and bribed (with jewelry) a Captain to allow the two to come aboard a smaller ship, known as a mine sweeper for the trip. The smaller ship was to go in front of the large ship to help break up ice. As feared, the large ship was struck by torpedoes and sank. The small ship continued on and made it to Mecklenburg, Germany, Elvira and Astrida immediately went to a displaced persons camp, their new home for nearly a decade.

The only way to get to America was to obtain a sponsor in the USA to support the trip and provide a home once there. During their time at the camp, Elvira operated a candy stand at a theatre. Young Astrida admired the professional artists and dreamed of becoming one herself. She begged her mom for vocal instructions and finally Elvira convinced one of the singers to give her daughter an "audition". Astrida was told she was too young (ten-ish) but the singer would give her 15 minutes a day of instruction. By the time she was twelve, Astrida was singing with the artists in benefits for British soldiers, and even had a role in a Franz Lehar operetta.



From Latvia to Lindsborg {con't}

In 1950, a Baptist Church in Watertown, NY agreed to sponsor Astrida and her mother, Elvira to America. Astrida was thirteen years old when she came to New York. Watertown was small, so Elvira got employment in NYC while Astrida stayed behind in Watertown. Soon, a Latvian committee in NYC assisted in getting Astrida back with her mother, and also made it possible for voice lessons to resume with Victor Stott, renowned Latvia opera singer. Astrida's grandmother, Emelia Pleiss, found a sponsor in Lincoln, NE to get her to America, so that is where she stayed for most of her life. Elvira and Astrida made the trip to Lincoln to reunite, and while attending the Lutheran Church there, young Astrida met another Latvian similar to her age, by the name of Uldis Cepure. Their story doesn't really start here, but their path would continue to cross at that church.

In New York City, Astrida's musical career took off, both Astrida and her mother changed their last name to Neilson when they got to America, and Astrida also dropped the "a", to Astrid Neilson. 1954 made any vocalist's dream come true, Astrid performed at Carnegie Hall for a series of shows. Most of Astrid's performances were at clubs, and though she was a gifted soprano, she was also a natural with show tunes and "pop" music of the era. She was cast in Broadway's Arabian Nights in 1954 and by 1955 got a television spot on Arthur Godfrey's



One of Us. Singer Astrid Neilson, 20, happily displays her final citizenship papers at Federal Court House. The blonde nightclub singer, born in Latvia, has lived in this country for five years.

Talent Scout program. Astrid traveled all over too, she was part of the 1956 Water Follies traveling show. More importantly, Astrid got her Naturalization papers in 1956, which made the current name legal. Astrid also had a part in the musical, "Kismet" and cast as a southern girl in "Damn Yankees". Her personal life was glamorous too, as she was dating Columbia millionaire Raphael Peradez during this time. Her heart though, was

back in Lincoln, Nebraska, where that young man, Uldis Cepure was a theology student. In 1957 Uldis and Astrid married, and Astrid "retired" from her glamorous lifestyle.

Their first child, Daina, was born the following year in Freemont, NE where Uldis was a student at the Lutheran seminary.



Astrid completed a business course at the National Business Institute in Lincoln, NE before joining her new husband in Freemont to work. In 1959 Rev. Uldis Cepure received a call to fill the summer at Friedens Lutheran Church in Home City, KS, close to Marysville. The next year their second child, Anita, was born back in Fremont, NE. Astrid and the children followed Rev. Cepure, back to Home City, then to Wakeeny, KS and the Zion Lutheran Church. Their third and final child, David, was born 1963 in Wakeeny.

Weddings and funerals became a family affair, one 1970 instance had Rev. Cepure officiating the wedding, Astrid singing with Anita on organ, and David as ring bearer. The 1970's saw more widespread travel, first to a church in South Dakota, then in 1974 to Philadelphia, PA. Astrid also gave concerts nationwide, typically Latvian churches.

Their eldest daughter, Daina, moved to Lindsborg to attend Bethany College, and would become an RN and Director of Nursing at Riverside Home in Marquette, KS.

Anita followed closer to Astrid's early life, traveling to New York to pursue a career as a pianist and model. She appeared on the Joey Adam's Show and studied at Julliard. Back in Lindsborg, Anita worked as a piano accompanist at the high school.

The youngest, David, also went to Bethany College as an art major, and became an accomplished artist. But food and cooking was his passion and career.

Uldis and Astrid divorced, both later remarrying. Astrid married Louis Berrios in 1997 and settled in Lindsborg. Her mother, Elvira would also move to Marquette, KS and all children were drawn to Lindsborg. Astrid passed away Dec. 9th, 2011, an immigrant who embraced and lived the American Dream.



Chet Peterson
1926-2023

Chester, or "Chet" served on the SVHA board for thirty-two years, a feat only outdone by Doc Fredrickson. Chet served as President and was on many boards over those years. He was an amazing person, farmer, conservationist, and historian, and his legacy will carry on for generations to come. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the family.



Upcoming SVHA Programs

May 9th, 2023

"Little Poova" Remembers Doc Bill (Dr. William Holwerda)

Betty Holwerda Nelson



July 11th, 2023

Politics in the 1800's

John Burchill



Sept. 12th, 2023

Saucers & Aliens

The Strange Collection of Dr. E.D. Janzen

Jim Gray "The Cowboy"



All programs
start at:
7:30 pm

Location:

Messiah Lutheran Church—Fellowship Hall
402 N. 1st Street—Lindsborg, KS.

Please cut along the dotted line

Smoky Valley Historical Association
P.O. Box 255
Lindsborg, KS. 67456

☐ \$25 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$100 ☐ Other \$ _____

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Memberships are renewed in the first quarter of each year

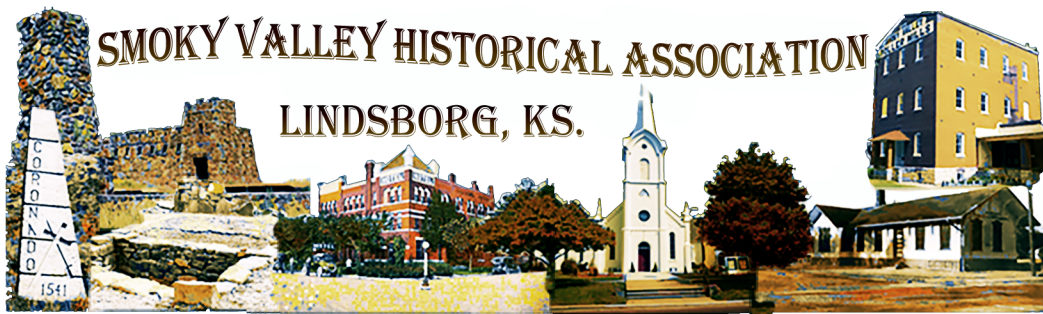


Smoky Valley Historical Association is a non-profit organization and is registered under 501(c)3

All Membership Donations, Bequests, Trusts, and Legacy Donations are tax deductible.

Please mail to P.O. Box listed above.

Thank You!



SMOKY VALLEY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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Smoky Valley Historical Mission

The purpose of this association shall be to collect, arrange and preserve historical data, books, pamphlets and manuscripts pertaining to the early history and settlement of our community in general and the City of Lindsborg in particular; to preserve and beautify places of historical interest in our city, its vicinity, and properties entrusted to the association; and to promote the study of history of our settlement and its cultural growth by lectures and other available means.

Contact info:

email us at:

info@lindsborghistory.org

or mail to:

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 LINDSBORG, KS 67456

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TACK SÅ MYCKET!



SMOKY VALLEY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
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Bumper Stickers
Available at Old Mill!

Meetings/Programs

Smoky Valley Historical Association hosts bi-monthly meetings on the odd months, held on the second Tuesday. Programs start at 7:30 pm with topics of local historical interest. Location is listed on page three along with schedule.

Come join us!



Funding

Membership contributions are the SVHA's major source of on-going funding. A free-will donation in any amount will secure your membership in the Association for the year. Memberships are renewed in the first quarter of each year.

Grants, such as those awarded by the Kansas Humanities Council, are also available from time-to-time to further the mission of the SVHA.

Check our Facebook page for the most up to date information concerning the Smoky Valley Historical Association.



Thank you for your contributions, and supporting the historical preservation of Lindsborg and the Smoky Valley of Central Kansas.

Our pioneers left their legacy long after they were gone, so can you. Managing estates, bequests, and gifts through retirement plans can help keep our preservation ongoing and long-lasting.

All donations are tax exempt, we are a 501-(c)3 organization